

# Study Guide # 11

## Film Theory, Criticism and Evaluation

FTVDM 122B  
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### Film Theory – An Overview

By the 1920's a number of serious thinkers realized that cinema was much more than a simple-minded mass media product and they began to write instructively about the nature of the new art form. Unsurprisingly, these early film theorists tended to view film from either a **Realist** or a **Formalist** perspective as they attempted to answer the following questions.

1. What is the **“raw material”** of film?
2. What are the **“methods and techniques”** that shape the raw material?
3. What are its **“forms and shapes,”** i.e. what kinds of films have been made and what kinds of films might possibly be made?
4. What is the **“purpose and value”** of film?

As with any living, breathing, dynamic art form, an art undergoing change and innovation, these questions are still relevant today, and in fact, ***they are the very issues that we have explored in our class.***

### The First Film Theorists

#### Formalists

**Hugo Munsterberg** – A Gestalt Psychologist, Munsterberg argued that **the illusory nature** of the film experience is its most salient characteristic. For Munsterberg, cinema was the **Art of the Mind**. How the mind constructs a complete perception out of separate sensations was the important question for Munsterberg?

**Rudolf Arnheim** – With his background in art criticism and perceptual psychology, Arnheim shared many of Munsterberg's ideas, but he took them to extremes. Arnheim felt that cinematic art is achieved only when its **material limitations are utilized to create perfect illusionism**. He disapproved of using sound and other elements of realism, and he felt that cinema had found its perfect form in the late 1920's at the height of the silent era. For Arnheim, the introduction of sound ruined the art of film.

**Sergei Eisenstein** – For Eisenstein, a Russian Constructivist who studied engineering, each shot was a building block within which the **content must be totally controlled**. Cinema art is achieved through the **montage**. Realism is not important. Artistic **creation through montage** is the goal of the art of film. **Methods of Montage:**

1. **Metric** - editing by the number of frames
2. **Rhythmic** - continuity based editing
3. **Tonal** - based on motional content of shots
4. **Overtonal** - incorporates metric, rhythmic, and overtone
5. **Intellectual** - shots provide abstract meaning

## Realists

**Siegfried Kracauer** – Kracauer believed that the appropriate content for cinema was the real “**photographic world.**” The form was of much less importance. Kracauer was fascinated by how the physical world is transformed and **redeemed** by the act of photography, how photography by its very nature makes the physical world look more interesting and important. His important book on the subject was: **Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality.**

**André Bazin** – Bazin is the most influential of all of the early theorists, but he was also a major film critic of the 1930's, 40's, and 50's. Bazin valued **documentary realism** and ***mise en scène*** over montage. His enduring contribution was his emphasis on the importance of the director as **auteur.**

## Film Theory and Criticism

Over the last thirty years, film theory has become almost exclusively the province of academia. Today scholars explore the nature of film through psychoanalysis, semiology and language, structuralism and myth, gender theory, economic, and cultural studies.

During the 1930's and 1940's in the U.S., critics such as **Robert Warshow**, **James Agee** (the novelist), and **Otis Ferguson**, wrote film criticism in the popular magazines and journals of the day. Their purpose was to intelligently separate out those films that were worthwhile from those that were a waste of time. Given their educational backgrounds in literature and politics, they tended to value films from Europe, Asia, and other countries much higher than the American films, concluding that our domestic product remained very immature artistically.

By the 1950's, a vibrant **film culture** had emerged in the U.S., arriving some twenty years behind other countries. Suddenly, American film culture benefited from a steady influx of films from Asia, Europe, Mexico, and many other countries, films that were distinctly different in form and content from the domestic products of the Studio Age. In addition to their formal originality, these films were more challenging artistically since they usually dealt with more mature subjects in ways that most Americans had not yet seen. Plus, they were also visually exotic.

The 50's film culture phenomena coincided with the proliferation of **Art Theaters**, a development lasting well into the 1970's. Part of the energy for this boom came from the fact that by the 1960's, the greatest figures of world cinema had also come of age during the same period of time. During this heady period of cinematic activity, an avid filmgoer could look forward to seeing a new film by Ozu, Kurosawa, Godard, Antonioni, Fellini, Sembane, or Bergman almost every week. This era of innovation influenced and sustained an audience of cinefiles, film buffs, and film school students, and academics, a time we have not seen since. Suffice it to say, that critics and cineastes enjoyed a rich trove of film treasures to watch, argue over, feel passionate about, and write about. Finally, a few of these cineastes even found the inspiration and drive to make their own films.

## State of the Art?

Reviewers, critics, academics, Bloggers; is everyone a critic these days? From what foundation can films be evaluated?

What are the differences between Reviewers, Bloggers, and Critics? (To be discussed in class)

## The Film Canon

What is it, and does the idea serve a purpose?

In 1994, Harold Bloom, a Professor and also a Literary Critic published an influential book, ***The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages***. Bloom argued that there are 26 works of literary art that stand the test of time; works that have had a deep influence on the culture, and that also serve as touchstones for all authors. And most important, these books continue to serve as a “Canon” for the teaching of Western Literature in our Universities. To be truly educated, a student, scholar, or public intellectual must be familiar with these essential works.

The question now arises, is there a similar “Canon” for film? Currently, it does appear that film has at the very least a de facto Canon. If you take a film history class anywhere, you will tend to be exposed to a consistent body of films that film scholars and fans believe are the most important works.

Take note of the Sight and Sound list below. Whether or not these films will actually survive the test of time it is too soon to tell. But for now, these are the films that are most discussed, taught and extolled as works that we need to be familiar with in order to claim some degree of “film literacy.”

Only a few years ago, the director, screenwriter, and scholar, Paul Schrader was asked by a British publishing company to write a book on the “Film Canon.” After several attempts, Schrader felt that he was unable to do a proper job at the time and abandoned the task. However, his introduction to the proposed volume was eventually published in the American journal, *Film Comment*. It is a highly interesting read and provides some insight into the question of what aesthetic values a critic needs to have in order to create a Film Canon. It is also fascinating to see what Schrader considers to be the most important films and why. I have uploaded his chapter to our class website in case you might be interested in reading it. Also, in the interest of transparency, Schrader was my screenwriting teacher.

## Film Journals

The journals listed below are representative of the range of serious film scholarship and criticism. Probably the most accessible introduction to the film journal world would be **Film Comment** since the journal is widely available at newsstands, highly readable, and it covers international cinema from a variety of perspectives. Part of the journal’s content is available at its website.

### Film Comment

<http://www.filmlinc.com/fcm/fcm.htm>

### Film Quarterly

<http://www.filmquarterly.org/index2.html>

### Cahiers du cinema

<http://www.cahiersducinema.com/>

### Cinéaste

<http://www.cineaste.com/>

### Bright Lights Film Journal

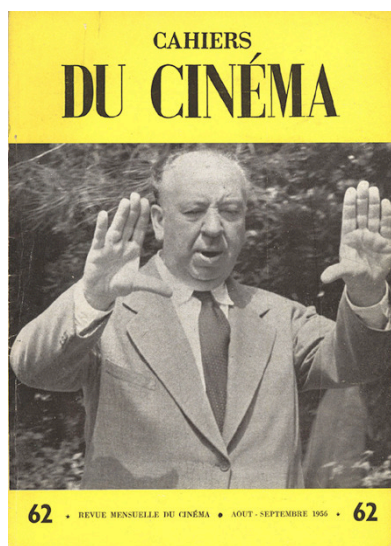
<http://www.brightlightsfilm.com/>

### Screen

<http://www.gla.ac.uk/services/screen/>

### Sight & Sound

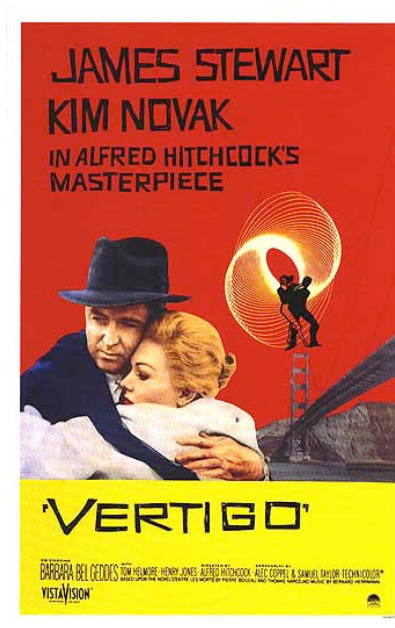
<http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/>



## Sight & Sound's All Time Greatest Films

Every ten years ending in 02 on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August, the British journal Sight & Sound polls a large number of critics and academics from around the world and creates a list of the top ten. For the last thirty years, the same titles reappeared with some degree of re-ordering. The latest list, appearing in August of 2012 revealed some significant re-ordering, but the most important change was that Citizen Kane, which has always been number one, fell to second place with Vertigo now number one.

See this link: <http://www.bfi.org.uk/news/50-greatest-films-all-time>



1. **Vertigo**
2. **Citizen Kane**
3. **Tokyo Story**
4. **Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans**
5. **La Règle du jeu (The Rules of the Game)**
6. **2001: A Space Odyssey**
7. **The Searchers**
8. **Man With A Movie Camera**
9. **The Passion of Joan of Arc**
10. **8 ½**

You don't have to study this section, but you might find it interesting...

**Sight & Sound's most significant films of the 2001 - 2011 decade (not in order of importance)**

<http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/49593>

**Adaptation** Spike Jonze, 2002

**Battle in Heaven** Carlos Reygadas, 2005

**The Beat That My Heart Skipped** Jacques Audiard, 2005

**The Bourne Ultimatum** Paul Greengrass, 2007

**Colossal Youth** Pedro Costa, 2006

**The Death of Mr Lazarescu** Cristi Puiu, 2005

**Eloge de l'amour** Jean-Luc Godard, 2001

**The Five Obstructions** Jørgen Leth, Lars von Trier, 2003

**The Gleaners and I** Agnès Varda, 2000

**Hidden (Caché)** Michael Haneke, 2004

**Inland Empire** David Lynch, 2006

**In the Mood For Love** Wong Kar-Wai, 2000

**Memories of Murder** Bong Joon-ho, 2003

**La niña santa (The Holy Girl)** Lucrecia Martel, 2004

**A One and a Two... (Yi Yi)** Edward Yang, 2000

**Platform** Jia Zhangke, 2000

**Russian Ark** Aleksandr Sokurov, 2002

**The Son** Jean-Pierre & Luc Dardenne, 2002

**Spirited Away** Miyazaki Hayao, 2001

**Talk to Her** Pedro Almodóvar, 2002

**10** Abbas Kiarostami, 2002

**There Will Be Blood** Paul Thomas Anderson, 2007

**35 Shots of Rum** Claire Denis, 2008

**Touching the Void** Kevin Macdonald, 2003

**Tropical Malady** Apichatpong Weerasethakul, 2004

**United Red Army** Wakamatsu Koji, 2008

**Uzak (*Distant*)** Nuri Bilge Ceylan, 2003

**Waiting for Happiness** Abderrahmane Sissako, 2002

**Werckmeister Harmonies** Béla Tarr, Agnes Hranitzky, 2000

**Workingman's Death** Michael Glawogger, 2005

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